

Mo. officials intensify fight to change Missouri flow

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WASHINGTON -- Isolated from its neighbors and fearful of drought, Missouri is stepping up efforts to block a federal government plan to tinker with the flow of the Missouri River to rescue endangered species.

Missouri officials appealed to the White House last week and argued in meetings in Iowa and Nebraska that changing the operations of dams on the river would disrupt farming, barge navigation and perhaps even the ability to generate electricity.

"It sets the wrong precedent when you're putting fish before people," said Rep. Sam Graves, R-Mo., who is among those who have taken up the cause.

The Missourians scored some successes: The Army Corps of Engineers delayed publishing its preliminary plan for new river operations at least until mid-March. It was due out last week, but the corps said that it was still reviewing 2,000 comments, most of them negative reactions from Missouri.

Missouri scored again when the eight-state Missouri River Basin Association declined on Thursday to endorse the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's plan for a "spring rise" in the river.

The plan that is riling Missouri would boost the river's flow in the spring and dramatically lower it in summer. The aim is to mimic the river's natural conditions before it was altered by dams and deepened for barge traffic. The corps would change its timing on releases of water from the Gavins Point Dam in South Dakota.

The Fish and Wildlife Service argues that the changes could save the endangered pallid sturgeon and two species of birds from extinction -- and save the corps from violating the Endangered Species Act.

The alterations would not occur for two years and then take place just once every three years. Nonetheless, important decisions are being made now on the extent of the changes, prompting a spate of efforts by Missouri officials to derail the plan.

Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond, R-Mo., has pressed the White House to review the proposed flow changes.

Missourians are maintaining a solid, bipartisan offensive. In a letter this month to members of Congress, Gov. Bob Holden, a Democrat, referred to the plan as "a seriously flawed proposal."

Earlier, Missouri interests stressed the threat of flooding. The Fish and Wildlife Service proposes to increase the water flow by 17,500 feet per second to 49,500 in the spring rise.

Recently, Missouri has emphasized the potential damage from a summer drawdown, which is intended to provide the slow, shallower waters that wildlife need to thrive. Missouri officials view this flow reduction as an opportunity for states upstream to ``bank" extra water in their reservoirs, thereby depriving states downstream.

A lack of snowfall in the Rocky Mountains this winter is increasing the stakes, Missouri officials say. That could translate to a scarcity of water in the Missouri River later this year and more competition between states upstream and downstream.

In his letter to members of Congress, Holden argued that the diminished water flow threatened not just the Missouri River but the Mississippi, too. The two rivers converge above St. Louis. Holden wrote that the Fish and Wildlife plan holds the potential of ``significantly disrupting river commerce" on the Mississippi in drought years.

Missouri officials also argue that the changes could threaten the production of electricity.

Susan Gallagher, a spokeswoman for Ameren, said her company was concerned that disruptions of water flow could threaten operations at its nuclear plant near Fulton, Mo., and its Labadie coal-fired plant in Franklin County.